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Interview: Carrie Sutton

Emily Caston



Figure 1: Carrie Sutton. Photo: Ben Meadows.

Carrie Sutton is a freelance directors' representative working with independent creatives as well as music video directors signed to Biscuit Filmworks, Blindeye Films, Good Co., Kode Media, Rankin and The Graft. In her role as Music Video Commissioner, she has commissioned videos for Blur, Tina Turner, Pet Shop Boys, Snow Patrol and Robbie Williams amongst many others, with artists picking up three Brit Awards for Best Video, an MTV Award and a D&AD Yellow Pencil Nomination. In 2018, she was awarded the 'Outstanding Achievement' award at the UK Music Video Awards in recognition of her career as a Creative Commissioner, Directors' Rep., Executive Producer and Producer.

Interview conducted in London on 16 November 2016.

It all started in the 1980s. My sister was a great friend of Eric Fellner when he was one of the early producers of music videos at MGMM. She was styling music videos and when I was seventeen or eighteen I started to assist her. I did an English degree, and in my university holidays I'd work on shoots doing ridiculous things like finding clothes for a giant the night before a shoot. My first job was a remake of Duran Duran's *Girls on Film* [1981] directed by Russell Mulcahy with Arlene Phillips and the skaters from *Starlight Express*.

I just went with the flow, because I never had a big plan. After I graduated, I worked as a cleaner for a producer called Frank Hilton and I did some painting and decorating for another producer called Anita Staines. Fortunately, Frank offered me a job as receptionist at his production company Harry Five, and I worked there for him and Tessa Watts before they started Propaganda UK. I got friendly with some of the producers and they started to give me little PA [Production Assistant] jobs, and soon after that I went into production myself.

Then I became Head of Production at Kudos on Argyll Street in Soho. Kudos was started by Stephen Garrett and Debbie Mason. From the beginning, they were building their whole TV thing. Music video was more Debbie's thing and she hired me to start a department. Videos were seen as the best way of nurturing new directing talent at that time, and lots of production companies were doing it. We were seen as "the nutters" in the side office. We had a small roster of directors—Jake Nava, Jeff Thomas and Grant Gee. Nick Gordon used to work with us sometimes but we didn't have the capacity to represent him fulltime.

As a producer, you never ever stop learning. Every single job is different. Every single director is different. Every single DoP [Director of Photography] is different. You just build up experience or different trauma.

The first video I actually produced was for U2. The track was called "Lemon" [1993]. Producing it was a baptism of fire. It was a two-day shoot and we shot on 35mm. I didn't have a PM [Production Manager] because I'd worked as a PM and PA for so long that I was used to doing everything myself. On the first day, I just sat in the production office and let the crew get on with it. I thought everything on set was going great and everyone was happy. It was. But then the first AD [Assistant Director] told me at lunch that they'd used all their film stock because they'd shot loads of slo-mo [slow motion]. He asked me for the rest of the film stock. He and the director assumed I had some secret stash under my desk or something. I didn't! Luckily, the budget was OK so I managed to buy some more film, but after that I was very cautious about how much film I ordered and I was very strict with my directors about how much they shot. I can't remember exactly how much the budget was. I've got a feeling it was about £70,000 or £80,000. But I might be lying. I'm very good at forgetting budgets because it's what everyone wants to know. It's a protective mechanism. I don't like to share that information.

Also, it doesn't matter how much the budget is when there is so little a connection between the actual budget and the production value. There's no point in me saying, "Oh well I only spent ten grand [£10,000] on that video" because in the music video business, the actual value of a ten-grand video will *not* be ten grand. The producer will have pulled an amazing location or loads of free extras, or the crew may have worked on it for free because they want to work with that particular artist or that director; so the actual value of that ten-grand video might be seventy grand [£70,000].

If an economist looked at our business, we'd probably get locked up for being insane. They'd say, "What do you mean, you did that music video for a fee of this much but then you got up the next day and did another music video completely for free?" In which industry does anybody do that? "Oh yes, we all did it for free because we like the director," or "We all did it for free because we like the idea." A plumber wouldn't say, "They had lovely tiles so I fitted the bathroom for free." Who else does that?

After that, I left Kudos and started freelance producing.

I became a commissioner by mistake. I got a call from Dilly Gent, the video commissioner at Parlophone, asking me to cover her temporarily while she went to New Zealand with Crowded House. Parlophone were commissioning for Radiohead and Supergrass, so it was a really exciting time.

I commissioned quite a few Blur videos such as *No Distance Left to Run* [1999], *Coffee and TV* [1999] and *Music Is My Radar* [1999]. My starting point for those videos was: what do we get with Blur? We need them to be in it, but what are they comfortable with? In *Music Is My Radar* we only see the band with the interviewer because that's all they were comfortable doing at that point—the rest of the focus is on the dancers. When we were making the videos for *13* [1999] they hated being on set. In fact, we even shot one video where they were asleep so they didn't even have to perform! We went into their houses and filmed them while each of them slept. By the time they woke up, the video had been shot. That's the ultimate not having to make any effort whatsoever. For *Coffee and TV*, again we did a video which didn't need them to be on set.

As a commissioner, the starting point is: how comfortable are my artists with this idea? How long will they stay on set? If Noel Gallagher will only give you a few hours, there's no point in pushing it. He'll turn up and he'll do what's needed, but he doesn't want to be there too long. If you push your artist to do too much, then you end up with rubbish footage of them. So you may as well go: what are you comfortable with?

In those days, the commissioner was a very powerful role at the label. Commissioners like Carole Burton-Fairbrother [Virgin] and Dilly Gent were real creative leaders. A lot of the really creative videos of that time made for bands like Radiohead, Chemical Brothers and Massive Attack only came about because the commissioners had a lot of creative freedom and weren't dogged by sixty-nine other people with opinions. Tessa Watts was a forerunner in commissioning who worked with the Sex Pistols at Virgin. Richard Branson was obviously very forward thinking in developing video with a commissioner like Tessa who he enabled to do very bold things at that time, challenging gender. It's not like that anymore. Things have changed a lot today; commissioners don't have so much power.

Parlophone was in the EMI Group with Chrysalis and while I was there I worked with Mark Collen, who was the Head of Marketing at Parlophone. Mark later got made Managing Director of Chrysalis and asked me if I wanted to be the Video Commissioner at Chrysalis. At Chrysalis I was really lucky because it was a small team—I think the core was about fifteen people working full-time. Everything was creative-led. We all got on really well. Mark, Gordon Biggins and Chris Briggs didn't interfere with video. They let me run with it and they trusted me. I was Head of Music Video at Chrysalis for around two years and Chrysalis was great.

Then I decided to go back to working freelance—this time as a freelance commissioner. It was the late 1990s and freelance commissioners were still rare although there were a few doing it in a low-key way. I didn't have a plan, but because I had been freelance I wasn't so afraid of that jump. Being a freelancer is such a weird thing: you might not choose to do it, but once you've done it, not doing the same thing every day of your life is really quite attractive. Some of the things about my permanent job at Chrysalis used to drive

me mad: interminable meetings and the daily commute driving across London to the same place every day. After two years I thought, “I want to make things. And I can still make things not being here.” Because I’d been freelance before, I knew something would catch me, something always comes up.

And it did: Robbie Williams’s management said: ‘Well we’ve got a really good relationship, so, even if you’re not at the label, could we carry on working with you?’ So they caught me. I’ve been commissioning for Robbie for twenty years now. I’ve been really lucky because Robbie is an artist who is prepared to go for it on camera. Robbie likes to push boundaries and he likes to try different things. My job with Rob is find something interesting enough for him to do in a video which will keep him challenged.

We started with a couple of jobs with Thomas Napper. *Lazy Days* [1997] is one of my favourite videos. It was supposed to be a gorgeous day but it poured with rain, so we got soaked and the cameras jammed but I just love the way it looks because Nic Knowland was the DoP and we shot it on Bolex. It was already obvious that video was going to become a really strong area for Rob, so it was a really exciting time. Rob was in rehab and it was such an interesting time to be working with Rob because it was seeing someone really trying to discover themselves as an artist. He’d just started working with [managers] David Enthoven and Tim Clark, and they were very supportive and really encouraged Rob.

The label wanted Rob to be up front and centre, really up front, really in your face, performing in that video. He was wearing the most beautiful McQueen long frock coat. But we were shooting in Bath and I can’t remember if anyone from the label even came down to the shoot to see what we were doing. I remember David being there but they hadn’t really seen what was going on. So it was all a big surprise when they realised when they saw the edit that Rob wasn’t up front and centre in all the footage. We used a lot of the footage where the cameras jammed because we thought it was interesting. And through necessity we had to use footage showing the umbrellas. The label said, “You can’t see the artist, he’s under an umbrella!” I thought I was going to get in big trouble for that one. But in the end loads of people loved that video.

With *Angels* [1997] the label put a hammer down and said, “This is the one where we go straight down the line: he looks nice, we should see him and he should look classic.” It was fun to do and it was directed by Vaughan Arnell who Robbie knew from the Take That videos. We had toys so it was all very exciting. We shot in down in Devon and Robbie got to ride a quad on the beach. It was action-packed with two helicopters, people on radios and helicopters flying down the shoreline.

Let Me Entertain You [1997] was so unexpected for an artist when we made it. Katy Conroy was our Head of Promotions and she loved how nice Robbie had looked like for *Angels*. But he had contained himself on that video. *Let Me Entertain You* was the video where Rob properly came into his own as an artist. He walked out of the changing room wearing these huge stiletto boots (which didn’t make it into the shoot) and the Lycra outfit. At the same time my phone rang. It was Katy Conroy asking, “He doesn’t look too outrageous does he?” I looked at him. He had all the makeup on, and the Lycra cat suit, and he was about seven feet tall in his heels. I said, “No Katy he doesn’t.” I just remember thinking, “He *does*, but we’ve got to let him go: we’ve got to let him off the leash. We’ve got to let him become Robbie the artist: a full-on no-holds barred entertainer.” Then *Rock DJ*

[2000] pushed it to another level. That was amazing to work on because of the fantastic visual effects and the prosthetics people. It was quite early days in motion capture technology and that made it really exciting. We had casts made of his body and did loads of post [production].

Vaughan [Arnell] is brilliant at working with Rob. He's just kind of got this sixth sense about where Rob is in his career and life, and what Rob is capable of and willing to do at any point in time. If Rob's at that stage in the album where he's knackered and he's been touring then Vaughan will come up with an idea that means we only need Rob for four hours. Vaughan is very good watching artists and seeing when the shutters are coming down and when he needs to stop. A lot of the videos Rob and Vaughan made together came from a little single seed, an idea from Rob which Vaughan then took over and ran with. Vaughan is great at taking what the artist wants and making it fun for them to film. He's got a really good marketing head which means he can build a bridge when there's a gap between what the artist wants and what the artist is capable of or what the label wants.

Another of my favourite of Rob's videos that Vaughan directed is *Supreme* [2000]. It used old Formula 1 footage. It was an incredibly well-crafted piece; but it was difficult to get footage and difficult to know how to use the footage. We had to be very sensitive because some of the footage captured terrible crashes so it became a research project too. Rob was really sick whilst we were making the video and we had to do an insurance claim and re-shoot it. There are always things that you are dealing with behind the scenes that make videos really special when you look back on them. I am really proud of what we achieved in the circumstances.

When Dom & Nic made *She's the One* [1999], they sent me a treatment and said: "Look I know this is really weird but does he ice-skate? We want to do it on ice." So I asked Rob and he answered, "Well I did when I was fourteen but, yeah, I'll give it a go." And he did! He's just so good at doing things. He'd say, "I rode a horse when I was ten so I'll give it a go." And he just gets on and does it. He's really good at sport. He's got really good balance and he's really confident. At the end of shooting *She's the One* the ice-skating coach said, "I wish we had got to him earlier he could be a bloody ice-skating champion." He was so good. So that's why we've ended up doing quite far-fetched things. Otherwise he just gets bored.

Rob and I have worked with amazing directors—not just Vaughan and Dom & Nic but Jonas Akerlund, Johan Renck, and WIZ did a beautiful one for him that was really different. We're still doing exciting things and challenging things twenty years in. As a commissioner it's been a gift working with him. We've travelled all over the world. We've shot in South Africa, we've shot in Canada, we've shot in LA and it's been amazing. Each video is a snapshot in time.

Later on, I joined a production company called HSI and stayed there for ten years. I went in on maternity cover and never left! They had an amazing US roster—Joseph Kahn, David LaChapelle—and they were one of the biggest companies in the States. We built up the UK roster with Jonas, Johan, then Jake and Jim and Howard Greenhalgh.

The way that we make videos now has changed. In the early days, we used to have to think about marketing for the USA. America was much more performance based and formulaic. There were more tick boxes. So you couldn't be quirky or weird if you were

making a video for the USA. People think MTV was a global platform but it wasn't: videos were curated differently in the States. That has completely changed now. MTV has gone. YouTube is a global platform.

You're also working more for the artist because you don't have to worry about pleasing the gatekeepers. The broadcast gatekeepers aren't there on YouTube like they were on MTV. The goal now is to get your videos shared. You've got to have a unique selling point—something bold, controversial, or arresting. Now that there are so many videos to watch online, how do you make people watch your video? How do you make sure it's not just music-video wallpaper?

Back in the MTV days there were all these rules about what you could and couldn't do: you couldn't do this, you couldn't do that, you couldn't smoke, you couldn't drink, you couldn't mutilate toys. It was relentless. I still have a huge pack at home actually of the rules—a big wad of information on what you can and cannot do. But now it's the opposite: we have the freedom to say, "This is a gritty track referring to something very visceral and traumatic or perhaps it's come out of a moment of violence in the artists' lives." Because we don't have the MTV gatekeepers anymore we can say, "Let's reflect that in the visuals because the video needs to be hard hitting."

On the other hand, it's hard now because so many of the ideas have been already done. How do you make a performance video that hasn't already been made? How can you make a performance video that people want to watch because it's different from what's already out there? Sometimes a treatment will come in and I will think, "Oh no that was done fifteen years ago!" But ideas do recycle in a slightly different way so you have to be careful. Ideas do just come back and come in waves actually. So usually, if a treatment comes in now that I think has been done before, however long ago it was, I'll think, "Yeah there are certain similarities, but let's push it more this way or that way or treat it differently." An old idea can still be approached in a fresh way.

Weird things happen when I'm commissioning: sometimes I'll get three ideas from three different directors that are almost identical: something's in the ether, something culturally is happening that everyone is tuned into. But I have to be careful if we commission one of those three treatments that the other directors don't think they've been ripped off: I'll ring them up and say, "Do you know what? You're going to see this video, it's going to look very similar to your treatment but I would like to say those three ideas came in and they were very very similar and we haven't ripped off your idea." There have been times when I have actually shown the treatment to the production companies and said, "These are two treatments, one from your director and one from the other director. You can see they've both come in."

Where the idea comes from depends on so many things, it's not always the director. Some artists have been to film school and are very literate. I worked with The Maccabees recently and they all went to art school. They were far more knowledgeable than me about film and are really visually educated. Other times you have artists who don't even want to turn up. If that happens, you're putting more onus on your director to come up with something. Or the idea might come from the marketing department saying, "This is exactly what we need for this: this is the artwork, this is their styling and this is the colour palette." The balance is different for the different artists.

But when I read a treatment sent in by a director or director's rep, I read it with an artist's eye, and ask whether the idea is really connected to the music, properly connected to the music: has the director understood the music and understood the artist? If it's a great idea and the director has understood the artists and the track, that's when you get something that is really special.

How has the industry changed? People are shooting more on film again these days, strangely. All my younger directors talk about it. They want to shoot on 16mm. They've all watched it, and love it.

For a while there were big production companies with really big rosters, but now there's really only RSA and Partizan that big. There are smaller companies again now, like in the early days. Directors today don't want to be sucked up onto those really big rosters, and people can run companies in a really small efficient way now. Smaller companies make it work by doing content and all those other things as well. There are more family type production companies: small dysfunctional families.

I don't know anybody who is just doing music videos now. At Kode, we say to new directors coming to us: don't think you can ever now make a living just doing music videos. You have to have other things going on. You have to be editing. Or you have to be art directing or production designing. The budgets just aren't there. Today labels are looking for a lot of content for many different platforms. Many directors also shoot content or they'll direct live studio sessions.

Interviewing people for music video must be such a nightmare: we're all deaf because we've listened to too much loud music. And we've got shit memories. We all got really old by mistake!

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